

Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad: A 12-Day EFL History Unit

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Introduction

"On my Underground Railroad, I never ran my train off the track, and I never lost a passenger," Harriet Tubman recounted with pride in later life as she reflected on her success as a guide on the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad (UR) was a system of people who helped American slaves to escape from the South to freedom. In the above quotation, Harriet was referring to the fact that she never lost her way and that each escaping slave she led reached freedom. In studying about her in a content unit, students can not only learn historical facts about the UR and Harriet's life, but also achieve a powerful resonance with her persevering spirit.

In this article, I will describe the unit I created with authentic materials from the United States. I made it to fit the level of my students at Asia University. These students were freshmen enrolled in an upper-intermediate level of Freshman English (FE), a required EFL course that met five days a week for 45 minutes each day. This unit is designed for 12 such 45-minute periods.

Developing a cultural unit responded to student interest and also met one of the Center for English Language Education (CELE) goals. A number of my students had expressed in a year-end survey that they wanted to study more about American culture. Helping our students to increase their knowledge and understanding of other cultures is also one of the CELE program's three main Freshman English goals (Morrison & Paullin, 1997).

Students seemed particularly interested in African-Americans because they often asked me questions about them. However, I had heard a few students on occasion repeat negative stereotypes about African-American people. I decided a unit on the life of a positive, admirable African-American would captivate student interest, give them some new cultural information about African-Americans, and provide them with an opportunity to rethink their evaluations of this group. I chose Harriet Tubman to study because not only was her life important but her story is also dramatic and engaging. Further, my students had some familiarity with American slavery since they had studied about it in high school, yet they had never heard of the UR or Harriet Tubman.

Objectives

The objectives for this unit fell into two categories, cultural and linguistic (see Appendix A). Regarding the cultural objectives, I wanted students to become aware of the positive personal qualities and contributions to society of a famous African-American. I felt that studying the life of one person would be an effective way to get students to identify with a group of people different from their own. At the end of the unit I did not provide any clear conclusions, preferring to leave students to draw their own conclusions and hoping that they would challenge stereotypes they may have held previously about African-Americans.

In addition, I wanted female and male students to have the experience of studying the life of a woman, a small step in redressing the traditional underrepresentation of the study of women in schools. I hoped that the women in my classes would be inspired by studying the life of this strong woman and would see her as a role model. Besides studying about a positive African-American woman, I wanted students to gain some insight into one chapter of the history behind today's race relations in the US.

The linguistic objectives for the unit were for the students to make progress in all four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), to build vocabulary while focusing mainly on the informational content of the unit, and to gain confidence through mastering substantive subject matter in English. The objectives of the lessons, as well as the focus of the unit test, were to understand and discuss the content. The only explicitly-stated linguistic goal was vocabulary development. Students studied lists of words as homework before each lesson.

The benefits of learning a foreign language through content-based instruction are widely known. It has been found that language is most effectively learned in context and that it is best if this context is authentic, that is, created with native speakers in mind rather than specifically

for foreign-language learners (Brinton, D., Snow, M., & Bingham Wesche, M., 1993). Nearly all of the materials in this unit are authentic, having been created for children and teens in the US. Content-based instruction is also advantageous because of its focus on meaning over form. Krashen (1993) asserts that language is acquired only through *comprehensible input* and that the meaning inherent in content-based lessons "results in more comprehensible input, and thus more language acquisition" (p. 143).

Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad

Harriet Tubman (1820-1913) was born a slave on a large plantation in Maryland owned by the Brodas family. She experienced a great deal of suffering in her childhood. At age six, she was hired out to live and work away from her family. Her new mistress made her stay awake all night rocking the baby's cradle, and whipped her whenever the baby cried. One day when Harriet was 15, after she returned to live with her family, an overseer threw a heavy weight at her. It hit her on the forehead, rendering her unconscious for a month. In spite of never receiving any medical attention for this terrible injury, she did finally recover, though from then on she suffered from sudden sleeping spells and terrible headaches (Adler, 1992; Billingslea-Smith, 1988; Carter, 1990; McClard, 1991; Petry, 1983).

For years she had visions of freedom, and finally at age 29, she ran away on the UR. She went alone since no family members were willing to go with her. The UR was a grassroots movement of people--Whites and Blacks, Northerners and Southerners--who opposed slavery and wanted to help slaves escape to the Northern states or to Canada. The term "the Underground Railroad" refers to the whole system of secret routes and hiding places used by the runaway slaves, and to the fundraising efforts supporting the runaways and those who helped them. Along the way to the North, the runaways were aided by homeowners, boatmen, wagon drivers, etc., and some had conductors who accompanied them. The UR began developing gradually in the late 18th century and ran until the end of the Civil War in 1865 (Adler, 1992; Billingslea-Smith, 1988; Carter, 1990; McClard, 1991; Petry, 1983).

After reaching the North successfully, Harriet became a conductor on the UR. In spite of the disability caused by her head injury, and of being unable to read, she successfully led over 300 slaves to freedom during 19 trips she took back to the South between 1850 and 1860. During this time, she also became a famous speaker at anti-slavery meetings in the North. As she became well known, the slaveholders in Maryland offered a \$40,000 reward for her capture, but she was never caught. During the Civil War, she aided the Union army as a scout and a nurse. In later life, she founded a home for homeless former runaway slaves and fought for women's rights (Adler, 1992; Billingslea-Smith, 1988; Carter, 1990; McClard, 1991; Petry, 1983).

Materials

The first step in creating this project was to gather the materials during a month in the U.S. I came back with children's books, a song, historical photographs and drawings, a board game, a newspaper children's page, a video, and background reading.

Most of these materials were created for U.S. children and teenagers. The language used was usually simplified, yet the materials were authentic, as they were created with native speakers in mind. In working with the authentic materials, students not only benefited in terms of language acquisition, but they could also see the importance U.S. education places on the contributions of minorities and women. One student remarked to her friend during an FE activity using the children's books, *Oh, Harriet really is a famous person!*

As part of this emphasis on multicultural education in the U.S., materials designed for children and teenagers on Harriet and the UR are widely available. I was looking for materials in February, Black History Month, and there were displays in libraries and bookstores on the UR specifically. I also contacted and obtained information from two organizations, the National Women's History Project, and the Harriet Tubman Coalition. I recommend allowing at least a month's time to collect materials for a historical content unit such as this one since it takes time to follow various leads, wait for bookstores to check if an item can be located at a different branch, etc. I also suggest creating units on individuals such as Harriet whose lives are studied in U.S. schools, so that materials can easily be found.

Daily Activities

The unit begins with schema-setting about heroes. Then students read and discuss Harriet Tubman's childhood, including why she wanted to run away. During the next five days, students learn about the UR through a reading, a speaking activity, a song, and a board game. At this point, the students read and watch video clips about Harriet's adult life to find out what she did to become so famous today. Finally, there is a speaking activity which gives students a chance to reflect on what they have learned, and a test on the last day (see Appendix B).

The following is a description of each of the 45-minute lessons as well as students' responses to them. Different lessons focus on different language skills, and there is an emphasis throughout on active, communicative activities. The student reactions reported here are taken from a survey I gave at the end of the unit in 1996.

Day One: Introductory activities

The purpose for having an introductory day was twofold: to introduce the idea that we were going to study the life of a famous person and to raise student consciousness regarding the underrepresentation in historical study of the lives of women and people of color. In groups of three, students warmed up by making lists of five famous people they had studied in high school. Then they interviewed each other about their favorite famous people, using interview questions that had been modeled for them. After this, students looked again at their lists of five people, and were asked to count how many were male and how many female. Nearly all were male. At this point, I talked briefly about the underrepresentation of women in history. I told the class that I wanted to introduce them to one of my favorite famous people, an African-American woman named Harriet Tubman. Students felt it was interesting hearing about their classmates' favorite famous people. One student said, *I also wonder why there are more men heroes than women ones.*

The unit syllabus, containing the topic and homework for each day, was handed out at the end of this first class. The daily homework consisted mainly of vocabulary words to look up, and we went over the words together quickly at the beginning of every class.

Day Two: Slavery

The second lesson was designed to provide students with enough background on slavery so that they could understand the story of Harriet Tubman and the UR. Students were given a handout with seven authentic historical photographs or drawings depicting various aspects of slavery. First, in order to activate prior knowledge, students took turns asking each other, *What do you see in this picture?* Although this speaking activity was intended to be just a brief warmup, students were very engaged with trying to figure out on their own the facts behind the pictures. Some classes talked about them for up to twenty minutes. Students reported that they were surprised to realize they already had some knowledge about slavery.

The main activity was a four-minute mini-lecture by the teacher on the history and conditions of slavery, during which students chronologically ordered the pictures in front of them. Then the lecture was read again while students completed a handout with comprehension questions. Students expressed sadness over the conditions of slavery and shock over some of the pictures.

Day Three: Harriet Tubman's early life

Through a jigsaw reading, students learned the story of Harriet's early life. The reading was six paragraphs long. Students worked in pairs. Each student had the complete first and last paragraph, but Student A was missing paragraphs two and four, while Student B was missing paragraphs three and five. In place of each missing paragraph, each partner had two questions about it. After reading for about fifteen minutes, partners asked each other about the missing information, listened to the responses, and wrote them down. At the end we checked the answers as a class, and the students looked at illustrations of Harriet's early life from the

children's books *A Picture Book of Harriet Tubman*, *Harriet Tubman*, and *Harriet Tubman and Black History Month*. Students were also given maps of the Northern and Southern states with Maryland and the Brodas plantation highlighted.

Day Four: The Underground Railroad I--*The mini page*

This lesson introduced students to the basic facts and terminology of the UR through *The Mini Page*, a syndicated newspaper insert for children. Students perused the many short blurbs of information in *The Mini Page* for the answers to a cloze summary on the UR. They were also shown an overhead projector map of the three main routes of the UR.

Days Five and Six: The Underground Railroad II and III--jigsaw speaking activity

The fifth day began with a brief memory card game to review the various secret terms (*conductor*, *safe house*, etc.) associated with the UR that the students had learned the previous day. Then they continued the main activity, in which they added some details to their understanding of the UR through an information-sharing task. On day five, each of five groups of students was given a different page of the children's book, *If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad*. Each page contained a question and answer about the UR. The groups prepared for the day six speaking activity by first discussing what the most important points of the answers were, then writing a one-to-two-sentence summary of the answers, using their own words. After I checked their summaries, they memorized them for use during day six.

On day six, students shared their summaries with members of other groups. They sat in groups of five with one member from each group and took turns asking and answering the questions they had studied the day before, and writing down the new information. When a group member's answer was unclear, students practiced asking for clarification and repetition, and often asked about the historical-cultural meaning of new words and phrases as well.

Day Seven: The Underground Railroad IV--The song, *Follow the drinking gourd*

Follow the Drinking Gourd is a slave song whose secret lyrics tell fellow slaves how to find the way north to the banks of the Ohio River where a certain conductor would be waiting to carry them across in his boat. The drinking gourd means the Big Dipper, which points the way to the North Star. Learning this song gives students a sense of the secretiveness that surrounded the UR.

Students had read a handout, *The Story Behind the Song*, as homework. As we learned the song, I checked their understanding of the lyrics and showed them the children's book about the song, *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, as well as maps of stars and of U.S. rivers. We sang along with the version of the song recorded by the Weavers. Students said that it was fun singing though the song was a little difficult, and that the secret language in it was surprising. The class ends with role-play discussions in which students imagine they are slaves who have been taught this song and are considering whether to follow its instructions and run away.

Day Eight: The Underground Railroad V--The Underground Railroad board game

Students imagined that they were slaves running away on the UR as they played the game, *Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad*. The purpose of playing the game was to review in a fun way the things students had learned in the past four days about the UR. When landing on a space, a student read it, then had to say something about it. For example, if the space said, *Slaveholder is looking for you*, the student could either respond with historical information such as, *Slaveholders often placed advertisements in newspapers for runaways slaves* or could elaborate imaginatively on his or her own circumstances such as, *My master was so cruel! I'm going to run as fast as I can*. I gave prizes to the group who did the best at speaking in English only, referring to historical information, and being creative. The students

said playing the game was a good review. One student explained, *I understood Underground Railroad. I felt I was a slave.*

Days Nine and Ten: Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad I and II--reading and video clips

Now that students understood what the UR was, it was time to learn about the role that Harriet Tubman, whose early life they had studied on day three, played as the most famous conductor on the UR. On day nine, students worked with a cloze summary of the main events in Harriet's life. They found the missing information from a reading they read in class, adapted from the children's book, *Harriet Tubman*.

On day ten, students watched 34 minutes of video clips from *A Woman Called Moses*, a film starring Cicely Tyson. Before this day, they had studied a handout with summaries of the four scenes they would watch, since the language is difficult to understand. They also had been given an essay assignment (due day 11) for which they could get ideas from the clips. Students found the video clips useful in imagining the period and events they had studied. One said, *It's helpful for imagining Harriet life or the period*, and another commented, *I saw the video, I imagined real slavery.*

Day Eleven: Essay sharing and discussion

Students reflected on what they had learned and reviewed for the test by sharing and discussing the short essays that were their homework for this day. In groups of three, students discussed each of the four essay questions for about 10 minutes. For each essay question, a student first read his or her essay while the others listened and asked questions when they needed to seek clarification. After listening to each other's essays, students discussed the question for the remainder of the 10 minutes, using strategies they had learned earlier in the year for keeping a conversation going and expressing opinions. Students were interested in each other's opinions and felt the discussions were thought-provoking, saying: *This discussion made me consider well*, and *The group discussions made us really think*.

Day Twelve: Unit test

The test (100 points) included historical information, vocabulary, and analysis and reflection questions. Student evaluation in this unit consisted of the test and the four essay questions (50 points) from day eleven. Therefore, the unit was worth 150 points, 15 % of the students' semester grade.

Recommendations for teachers

Because of positive student response, I strongly recommend this unit for use by other teachers. One suggested modification is adding a few days to the unit by making some lessons longer, especially when the unit is taught to students whose level is lower than upper-intermediate. The lessons that could be slowed down are days three, four, and eleven. If there were sufficient time and student motivation, this unit could be successful with intermediate students. However, it works best with upper-intermediate or advanced learners.

It would be beneficial to follow up the unit with a project that would give the unit increased relevance to today's world. For example, students could do writing assignments or presentations on related issues such as current race relations in America, problems of discrimination in various countries, or famous women in Japan.

This unit was my required Asia University project for 1997, and as such, the lesson plans and activities are available in their entirety at Asia University, and the lesson plans are also available on disk.

Conclusion

This unit's success was evident in the students' engagement as they entered into Harriet's life and times, and in the thoughtful individual conclusions they expressed in writing at the end of the unit. The linguistic and cultural objectives were certainly met, at times in unexpected ways.

The linguistic objective was for the students to make progress in all four skills and vocabulary while focusing mainly on the informational content of the unit. As stated earlier, language is best learned in context, and it is best if that context is authentic. In studying about Harriet Tubman, the students were interested in the material, so they were more focused on what they were learning than on the language they were using to learn about it. The authenticity and vividness of the materials brought this historical period alive. As one student said, *In my high school, I learned American culture. But it was just on text. I learned really American culture by this unit.* Due to the students' interest in the topic, they surely reaped the benefits of content-based education, making integrated progress in all language skill areas.

When asked in the survey how useful, on a scale of one (not useful at all) to five (very useful), the unit had been for their reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary, and knowledge of American culture, all areas were ranked highly, with very few rankings below three. All of the three classes surveyed reported that the most useful area had been knowledge of American culture. This speaks to the importance the students gave to the subject matter they were learning. Vocabulary and reading were also ranked especially highly in all three classes.

The cultural objectives were for students to recognize the positive contributions to society of a famous African-American, to see in Harriet a role model of a strong woman, and to gain some insight into one chapter of African-American history. Of these cultural objectives, the most overwhelmingly successful was the female students' response to studying about a woman:

1. *It was the first time for me to study womans history.*
2. *I'm sorry I don't know (Harriet) until I studied in this unit ... I'd like to know famous women in the world.*
3. *(Harriet) always acted bravely. She was great woman. As a woman, I think I'm proud of her.*
4. *She has a strong feeling and also she has a kind heart. Now I have a strong feeling and dream. So I want to get kind heart. I want to become Woman like her.*

These women expressed pride and admiration for Harriet Tubman as a woman and began to take an interest in studying about other famous women.

I had hoped that students would similarly recognize Harriet's contributions *as an African-American*; however, they did not say so explicitly in their survey comments though they did express a great deal of admiration for Harriet *as a person*. An unexpected response was found in the number of students whose comments spoke out against all discrimination even though in this unit, the issue of discrimination was not directly addressed. For example, one student wrote, *There are racial discrimination in the world. Racial discrimination is bad, wrong. We ought to stop this.*

The objective for students to gain some insight into African-American history was met as students reported that they felt they had learned a lot about African-American history. One student explained, *I didn't know American culture well, so (the unit) showed us how Americans got Freedom.* Another said, *Harriet Tubman story enrich me, because I understand those days in America.*

I felt the most surprising response was the inspiration many students took from the Harriet Tubman story for their own lives. I had thought they would probably admire her, but because of the different place and time in which these students live, I had not anticipated that they would relate her perseverance to their own dreams. One student said, *I was moved by Harriet's life. I also want to help people who are in hardship in my future.* Another concluded, *There's a hero lies in us. I want to become a hero.* That Harriet's life made the students think about their own lives demonstrates the real human connection they felt with her across time and culture. The strong impression this unit left on the students is sure to spark new reflections in

them over time, possibly when they are thinking about issues of perseverance or of race relations.

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Appendix A

Unit Objectives

Linguistic Objectives	Cultural Objectives
1. To make progress in all four skill areas and vocabulary while focusing mainly on the informational content of the unit.	1. To recognize the positive contributions to society of a famous African-American. 2. To gain a role model of a strong woman. 3. To gain some insight into one chapter of African-American history

Appendix B

Daily Activities

Day	Topic	Types of Activities
1	Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In small groups, interviewing each other about favorite famous people • Introduction of the syllabus
2	Slavery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussing photographs • Lecture: putting photographs in chronological order, then listening again to answer comprehension questions
3	Harriet Tubman's Early Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jigsaw reading and speaking activity
4	The Underground Railroad I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading a newspaper column and completing a cloze summary of it
5	The Underground Railroad II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Playing a memory card game regarding URR terms • Preparing group summaries about different aspects of the URR
6	The Underground Railroad III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking part in an Information-gap speaking activity
7	The Underground Railroad IV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Singing "Follow the Drinking Gourd" • Role-play discussions
8	The Underground Railroad V	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board game speaking activity to review about the URR
9	Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading about the main events of Harriet's life and complete a related cloze summary
10	Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watching video clips of Harriet's life while gathering ideas for essays
11	Essay Sharing Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essay sharing and discussions
12	Unit Test	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking a unit test